

Emptiness and Dependent Arising

From a buddhist point of view, the root cause of all our problems and difficulties is our misperception of reality. Whatever unpleasant and unwanted experiences we have can be traced back to this misperception that ascribes phenomena a mode of existence or characteristic they cannot possibly possess. So there is a disparity between the way phenomena exist in actuality and how we ordinarily perceive them to exist. We suffer because we are caught in that disparity; we apprehend the opposite of what is actually there.

Our reality, our daily life is made up of various different phenomena, situations and events. Some of them may be mere fantasies and not actually exist but the majority of them are existent functioning things. Although they exist, whenever we encounter those things they appear to our mind to have a characteristic that does not exist.

It is important to know that this unrealistic mode of existence appears to all our minds—to all our sense and mental consciousnesses. But not every mind perceives it. The awarenesses that actively apprehend this non-existent characteristic are described as misperception or ignorance.

The habitual misperception of reality, especially on the subtlest level, is so deep-rooted and entrenched, that we have to dive deeply into the description of reality, integrate it in our daily life and bring it onto an emotional level.

The *Fundamental Wisdom* therefore addresses the basic question of what reality is and how it can be understood. The ultimate reality of all phenomena is their emptiness which refers to the negation of the aforementioned unrealistic mode of existence.

Object of negation:

In order to gain a correct understanding of reality we need to follow a number of contemplative steps. The first step is to identify the object of negation of emptiness. The object of negation is described with terms such as the following:

inherent/intrinsic existence	existence from its own side	true existence
essential existence	existence by way of its own nature	objective existence
existing as [its own] reality	existence by way of its own character	ultimate existence

These terms basically have the same meaning. Our root ignorance over-concretizes the status of phenomena; it perceives each and every phenomenon as having an inherent, true, and self-instituting essence that exists in its own right. Ignorance perceives the “I”, the body, other people, trees, cars, situations, and so forth as existing above and beyond their parts, as having their own ontological status, existing objectively out there, independent of consciousness, and waiting to be revealed.

If however something really existed intrinsically, objectively, and so on, then a table for instance, would be inherent in its parts (its atoms, attributes, functions etc.) and would thus not depend on anything else, but be findable among its parts as a concrete and substantial entity. However, such a mode of existence is impossible. A table is not inherent in its parts, because it has dependently arisen. Whatever exists is interdependent and exists in relation to other phenomena; it depends on its parts and on a conceptual consciousness labeling it. Impermanent phenomena depend also on their causes and conditions, sense objects on sense consciousnesses perceiving them, consciousnesses on their objects and so forth. Therefore, there is no inherent table or anything else that is findable among its parts.

Of course, in general, we say for instance, that the USA is an independent nation, that we should consider a situation objectively, or that it is in the nature of water to be wet.

But that doesn't literally mean that the USA is not dependent on anything else, for it is dependent on its states, its population and so on. It is instead in relation to the fact that it is governed by the American people and controls its own affairs that we speak of the USA's independence.



Also, it is impossible to reflect on something objectively since we can only think about it with our mind which is subjective. So, it is in relation to for example, preventing afflictive emotions such as anger and attachment from distorting our judgment that we talk of an objective consideration.



Furthermore, according to common parlance it is accepted that wetness is the nature of water and thus inherent in water, but heat is not inherent in boiling water. One reason is that the hot temperature of boiling water depends on factors such as a hot stove that causes the water to boil. However, from a buddhist point of view, wetness does not exist inherently in water either, because it depends on factors such as its causes and conditions, its parts, the sense consciousness that perceives wetness, the conceptual consciousness that labels the wetness, and so on.

The heat is not inherent in the boiling water because it depends on the heat of the stove.

Wetness is not inherent in the water because it depends on its causes and conditions, its parts, and so forth.



Ultimate analysis:

Having identified the object of negation, the next step is to investigate whether the object of negation actually exists, whether such a true and objective existence holds up to analysis. Taking the example of the table, we need to analyze whether there is an inherent and ultimately existent table, a kind of "table-ness" that can be found among the parts, the shape, and the color of the table. If it really existed we should be able to find it.

It is important to understand that here we do not analyze *whether* the table exists but *how* it exists. However, since ordinarily we are unable to differentiate between the table that exists and between the inherently existent table that does not exist, it may seem that we are actually analyzing the existence of the table itself.

The buddhist scriptures describe numerous types of reasoning that logically refute the object of negation. If, for instance, a house existed inherently and was able to constitute itself we would be able to see the house without having to depend on seeing something that is not the house. However, in actuality whenever we say that we see a house we always see something that is not the house but only a component of it. The house consists of a collection of different parts assembled in a particular way. Yet when looking at the house it is impossible to perceive the entirety of those parts because when seeing the front we do not see the back, and when seeing the outside we do not see the inside. Since the front, the back, the inside, and the outside of the house are not the house, we only ever perceive something that is not the house. The same applies to other phenomena such as the “I”, the body, other people, trees, and so forth.

Furthermore, if an inherently existent house existed it would have to be either one/identical with its parts or different from its parts; there is no third possibility.

If the inherently existent house was different from its parts it would have to be completely separate from its walls, roof, windows, and so forth. In that case, the house would have to be findable after removing all its parts.

If on the other hand, it was one with its parts, it would have to be utterly and in all ways one with its walls, roof, windows, and so on. Since those parts are plural the house would have to be plural or since the house is singular the parts of the house would have to be singular.

Some people may argue that the house is identical with the *collection* of the parts, i.e. that the house is all of its parts assembled in a particular way.

However, then it would not make sense to talk of for instance, the “door of the house” since that implies there is something (i.e. the house) that possesses the door and is thus different from it. It would further not make sense to say that the house is neglected when only its exterior is rundown, because for the house to be in need of repair, all of its parts would have to be in need of repair, even if the interior has just been renovated.

This type of analysis is called “ultimate analysis” because it searches for a phenomenon’s inherent existence but instead finds the phenomenon’s deepest level of existence, its emptiness or *lack* of inherent existence.

Having thus negated the way phenomena do not exist we need to posit the way they do exist, for even though phenomena do not exist by way of their own character and from their own side, they nevertheless exists. The way they exists is explained in the context of explaining dependent arising.

Dependent arising

The Tibetan word for dependent arising, *rten 'brel* (Skt. *pratītyasamutpāda*), is the abbreviated form of *rten cing 'brel bar 'byung ba*. Since it is not easy to literally translate it, a translation of each word may help to get a better sense of its meaning:

rten = depend/rely,

cing = and

'brel ba = connect/relate/pertain to

'byung ba = arise/come forth/occur/originate